Dysfunctional Individuation Predicts Spiritual and Religious Struggle in Emerging Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Emerging adulthood, a time of instability and growing autonomy, has been associated with a decline in religiosity and an increase in religious and spiritual (r/s) struggle. In this study we examine the relationship between r/s struggle and dysfunction in the normative developmental challenge of individuation, a question novel to the literature. A random sample of 788 emerging adults (61% female, m age = 19.5) from a private Midwestern university was assessed on indices of r/s struggle, dysfunctional individuation, perception of religious support from parents and peers and spiritual growth mindset. Regression analyses found that dysfunctional individuation was a significant predictor of r/s struggle; and was negatively associated with parent/peer support and spiritual growth mindset. These findings have implications for understanding the developmental sources of r/s struggle.

BACKGROUND

In this project we explored the relationship between **dysfunctional individuation** and **religious and spiritual (r/s) struggle** in emerging adulthood, a question novel to the literature.

Individuation is a normative developmental challenge that confronts adolescents with the task of renegotiating the hierarchical relationships with parents in the direction of increasing balance, mutuality and reciprocity. Healthy individuation aims for *relational autonomy*: a workable balance between agency (autonomy) and communion (relatedness) whereby independence and self-governance are affirmed but in the context of ongoing relational commitments (Lapsley & Stey, 2010). The developmental task of the emerging adult is to flexibly manage the ongoing tension between separation and connectedness, while avoiding the undesirable outcomes of fusion and enmeshment on the one hand, and complete detachment and isolation on the other. Disturbances in individuation predict a wide range of adjustment problems (Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016).

Other studies have demonstrated that **religious participation declines over emerging adulthood** (Denton, Pearce & Smith, 2008; Hall, Edwards & Wang, 2016). Developmental theory suggests that emerging adults may be moving from the religious posture assigned to them through parental socialization to one chosen as an autonomous, individuated self (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). Sorting out one's fundamental stance towards ultimate questions is not without difficulty, and the process of choosing a religious and spiritual identity may lead to an increase in r/s struggle.

The prevalence of r/s struggle in emerging adulthood has attracted significant research interest, although extent research has focused on **social environment and religious or cognitive factors** rather than development as a source of this struggle (Ano & Pargament, 2013; Razmyar & Reeve, 2013). To account for the social environment and cognitive resources, we also examined the role of parent and peer religious support in r/s struggle, and the extent to which a spiritual growth mindset might counter-indicate r/s struggle.

HYPOTHESES

The aim of this study was to explore **whether dysfunctional individuation could predict r/s struggle** above and beyond social and cognitive variables. We hypothesized that:
1. Parent and peer support would predict r/s struggle. Previous studies have found that parent and peer support are key predictors of religiosity and help to protect against r/s struggle.
2. Spiritual growth mindset would predict r/s struggle. A growth mindset would allow the emerging adult to navigate transitions with less distress, serving as a protective factor and thus lowering the likelihood of ongoing r/s struggle.
3. Dysfunctional individuation would predict r/s struggle. Unhealthy individuation would lead to distress in other areas of life, including religiosity and spirituality.

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METHOD

Participants: Participants were undergraduate students at a private Midwestern university. The sample was 71% Catholic, 13% Atheist/Agnostic, 12.8% Protestant and less than 5% Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu. Approximately 61% were female, and the mean age of the sample was 19.5 years old.

Procedures: Participants were randomly selected and received an email asking them to participate in a survey about their religious and spiritual life. Participants filled out the survey online as part of a larger study on religious and spiritual development in emerging adulthood.

Design: Planned missingness was used in order to gather more information from the total sample. Multiple imputation (m = 100) was used to "recover" missing data. All results are pooled estimates from multiple imputation methods.

Measures
- **Dysfunctional individuation** was measured using the *Dysfunctional Individuation Scale* in order to determine the presence of relational intimacy and identity issues (Stey et al., 2013).
- Six critical domains of **religious and spiritual struggle** were evaluated using the *Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale* (Exline and Pargament et al., 2014). These domains were divine struggle, demonic struggle, interpersonal struggle with religious persons or spiritual leaders, struggles to apply one's moral beliefs, questions regarding ultimate meaning, and religious doubt. A high total score indicated intense and multifaceted r/s struggle.
- The **involvement of parents and peers in r/s development** was assessed using the *Parental Spiritual Support Scale* and a modified version of the *Friends Spiritual Support Scale* with one additional item. Maternal and paternal support were measured separately and combined into one index of parental support (Desrosiers et al., 2011).
- **Spiritual growth mindset** was gauged using a 6-item modified version of the *Theories of Intelligence Scale* in order to determine participants' beliefs regarding the plasticity of spirituality and possibility of growth (Dweck, 2008).

RESULTS

Table 1
Pooled Multiple Imputation for Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

Variable	M (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Religious and Spiritual Struggle (α=.92)	47.91 (15.89)	1			
2. Religious Support from Parents (α=.84)	22.71 (7.92)	-.06	1		
3. Religious Support from Peers (α=.44)	12.14 (3.52)	.02	.31***	1	
4. Spiritual Growth Mindset (α=.79)	29.76 (6.56)	-.06	.07	.12***	1
5. Dysfunctional Individuation (α=.79)	30.20 (9.39)	.43***	-.13***	-.18***	-.21***

Note. *** indicates p<.001

RESULTS CONTINUED

Table 2
Pooled Multiple Imputation Hierarchical Regression of Religious and Spiritual Struggle

	Unstandardized b	Standardized beta	R2	Wald Statistic
Model 1			.004	
Parental Support	-.04	-.02		
Peer Support	.04	.01		
Spiritual Mindset	-.08	-.04		
Model 2			.07	26.98**
Parental Support	-.01	-.004		
Peer Support	.15	.04		
Spiritual Mindset	-.01	-.01		
Dysfunctional Individuation	.41**	.25**		

Note. * indicates $p < .05$, ** indicates $p < .01$. The Wald statistic for multiple imputation (Rubin, 1987) is based on an F-distribution with (df1, df2). df1 =1, df2 = 416.1625.

DISCUSSION

- **Developmental processes matter.** The developmental process of individuation demonstrated a greater effect on r/s struggle than social and cognitive factors, and had the strongest relationship with all variables.
  - Longitudinal research is needed to provide a clearer relationship between developmental variables and r/s struggle.
  - Future research should assess whether this relationship continues to hold when other religious and spiritual variables are added to the model.
  - Other developmental processes may also provide insight into the field of psychology of religion and spirituality, and addition of developmental variables may provide more predictive validity to current models exploring religiosity and spirituality, especially during developmental transitions.
- **Spiritual mindset.** Although not found to be significant in predicting r/s struggle, assessing spiritual mindset is novel to the literature and should be further explored.
  - We hypothesized that spiritual growth mindset would serve as protective factor, but it may actually work as a coping mechanism, allowing those who experience r/s struggle to navigate that struggle. Longitudinal research could explore whether a spiritual growth mindset predicts a decrease in r/s struggle over time.
  - Since this is a new variable, further research should also explore its relationship to other religious and spiritual variables, especially variables related to religious coping.

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